

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Office of the Ombudsman

Tonya Vidal Kinlow
Ombudsman



To: Mayor Adrian Fenty
Council Chairman Vincent Gray

CC: Councilmember Carol Schwartz
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Councilmember Phil Mendelson
Councilmember Kwame R. Brown
Councilmember Jim Graham
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Chancellor Michelle Rhee
State Superintendent Deborah Gist
State Board of Education Members
Public Charter School Board Members

From: Tonya Vidal Kinlow
Ombudsman for Public Education

Date: July 7, 2008

Re: Office of the Ombudsman March 2008 Case Report

The Office of the Ombudsman submits the attached report and analysis of its March 2008 cases for your information. Please feel free to contact Tonya Vidal Kinlow at (202) 442-6363 if you have questions or need additional information.

Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education March 2008 Report

Each month the Office of the Ombudsman provides a report summarizing its activity. The Ombudsman's practice includes analysis of issues and development of interventions at the individual, group and institutional levels. Each case provides an opportunity to evaluate the public education system for process and policy improvements. When working to resolve issues, the Ombudsman acts independently, informally and neutrally. The Ombudsman is not an advocate for either side, but advocates for processes that lead to problem resolution and system reform. This report details the activity of the office in March 2008.

Analysis of Issues

Staff in the Office of the Ombudsman addressed 83 issues in March 2008. As in prior months, student issues comprised a majority. Staff members in our public schools continue to contact the office most frequently about pay and benefits. There was a slight shift in the most frequently raised student issue from safety related matters to administrative problems. Administrative issues include problems with school placement, transcripts and grades. Administrative issues also include concerns about proposed school closings and consolidations.

Figure 1 shows the frequency of the issues that the Office of the Ombudsman addressed on behalf of individuals.

	Issue Code	Definition	Frequency of Issue Reported
Personnel 12 %	PAM	Personnel Administrative	0
	PAT	Personnel Termination	3
	PPB	Personnel Pay/Benefits	6
	PPX	Personnel Other	0
	PSH	Personnel Safety/Harassment	1
Student 88 %	SAM	Student Administrative	18
	SCM	Student Communications	15
	SMD	Student Medical	2
	SSE	Student Special Education	10
	SSS	Student Safety/Abuse/Bullying	14
	SST	Student Suspension Truancy	11
	SPX	Student Other	3

Figure 1 – Case Code Definitions

Figure 2 is a breakdown of cases by the types of issues that individuals needed help resolving. In total, student related issues comprised 88 percent of the March Ombudsman cases. 12 percent of the issues involved personnel matters.

March 2008 Issues Summary

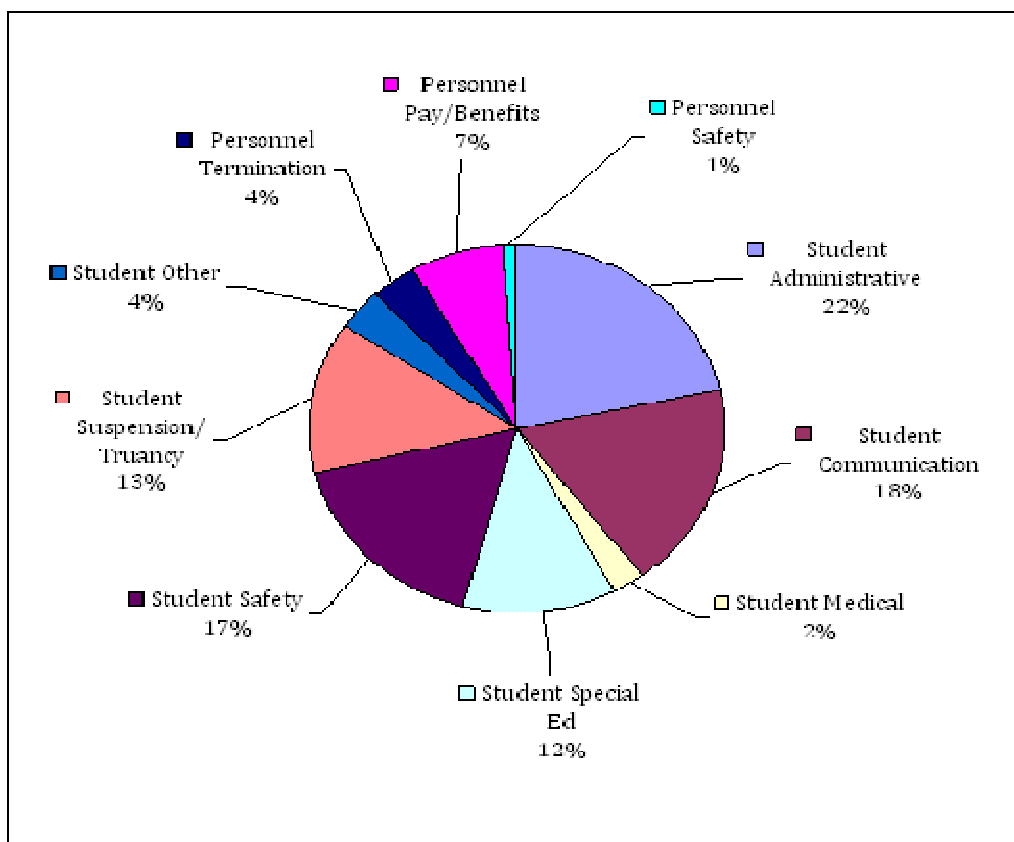


Figure 2 – Frequency Profile of all Issues

The office received fewer contacts than in prior months about suspensions and truancy, which represented only 13 percent of March cases. Yet, the percentage of cases involving communications problems continues to rank among the top. There is a correlation between failed communication and many of the cases of bullying, other types of student violence, as well as with special education cases. For example, parents often report that school staff dismisses reports of bullying. In contrast, school personnel believe when contacted about bullying they take appropriate action to address the problem by moving a student or giving verbal instruction to prevent an incident.

Similarly, when parents report concerns about student learning or special education needs, parents indicate that school staff fail to follow-thru on requests for support. In response to the special education issues, public school personnel say they never received the parent's request for support. The breakdown in communication between home and school creates distrust and escalates problems instead of creating pathways for solutions. A possible answer for many of the reported special education problems would be for the school to explain the special education process; including giving parents information about the time it takes to resolve the matter. Much of the work performed by staff in the Office of the Ombudsman focuses on rebuilding lines of effective communication to create functional working relationships between home and school.

March 2008 Student Issues

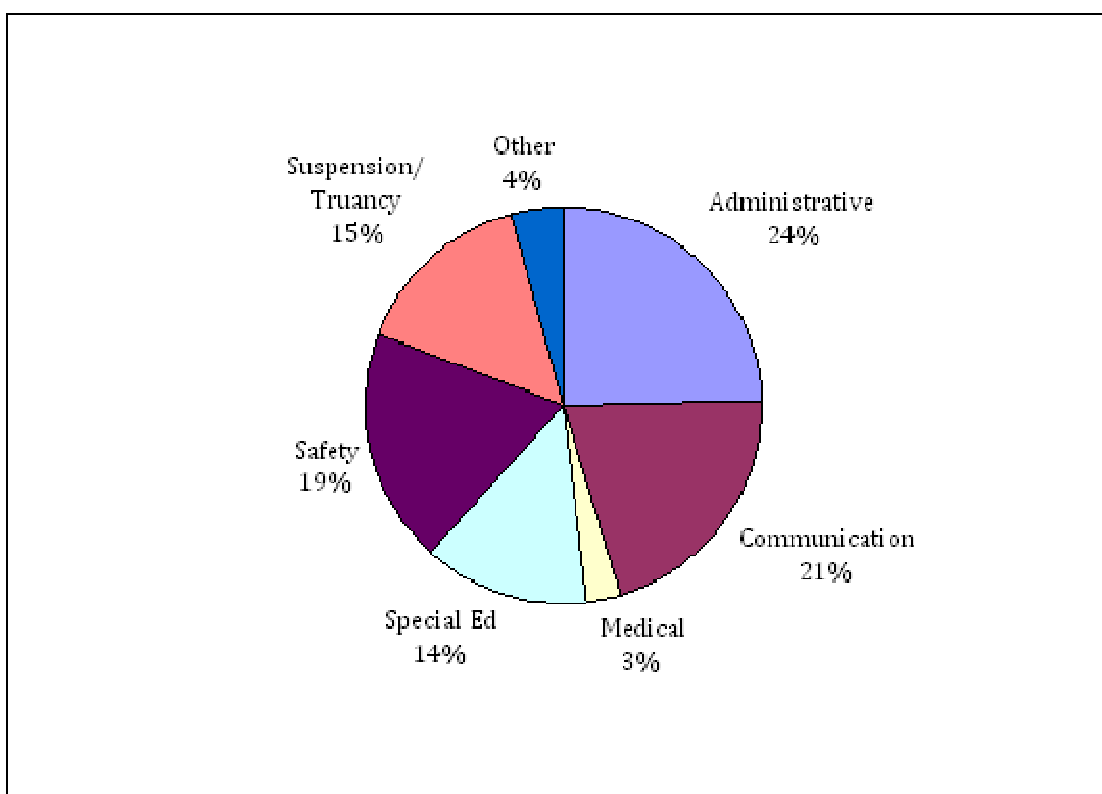


Figure 3 – Frequency Profile of Student Issues

Student Issues

Student Administrative (SAM) represented 24 percent of all student-related issues. Examples of the administrative issues are:

- Multiple requests for help transferring students to another classroom within a school and transfers to other schools

- Several requests from parents for information about proposed school closure
- Requests for help coordinating the services from multiple government agencies
- Concerns about various administrative areas in the university, including the financial aid office, product availability in the book store and class scheduling

The Ombudsman saw an increase in the number of cases involving safety-related concerns, which represented 19 percent of student issues. These cases included bullying and fights. The bullying cases highlighted two areas of concern that need further evaluation and action by school leaders.

- When addressing incidents involving consistent aggressive behavior by one student against another, the school staff often takes actions that impact the victim. For example, if the solution involves moving one student out of a classroom, the school moves the victim, not the perpetrator.
- School staff often ignores bullying until the incidents escalate to include acts of physical abuse.

March 2008 Personnel Issues

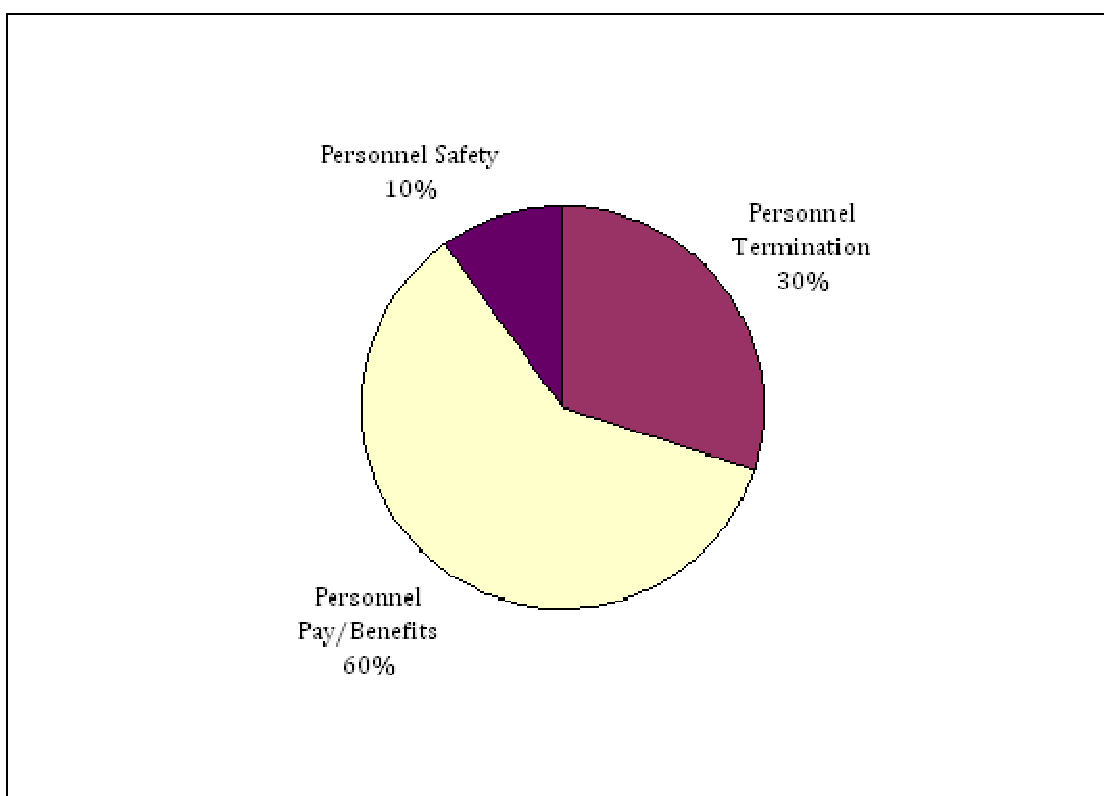


Figure 4 – Frequency Profile of Personnel Issues

Figure 4 shows the frequency of personnel related issues that the Office of the Ombudsman worked on in March. Consistent with prior months, pay and benefits issues topped the list of personnel concerns. The office received three complaints about the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) layoffs.

Many of the staff-related issues highlight procedural issues in human resources. For example, a DCPS employee received a promotion and related pay increase in 2006. The employee and the school’s principal submitted all of the required documentation to implement the promotion. According to the employee, it took almost a year before human resources updated the records. In February 2008, the employee was still working to get the school district to make salary adjustments to reflect the promotion. The employee contacted the Ombudsman for help resolving the back pay issue. Similarly, an employee who resigned in 2004 called the office to report that she is still getting insurance coverage through DCPS. The employee indicated that she has been trying to get the school district to terminate the coverage for years. She is now experiencing problems because she has coverage with the same plan through her husband’s employer. When she seeks medical care, the dual coverage creates payment complications. At the time of writing this report, the Ombudsman was still working with human resources staff to close the cases.

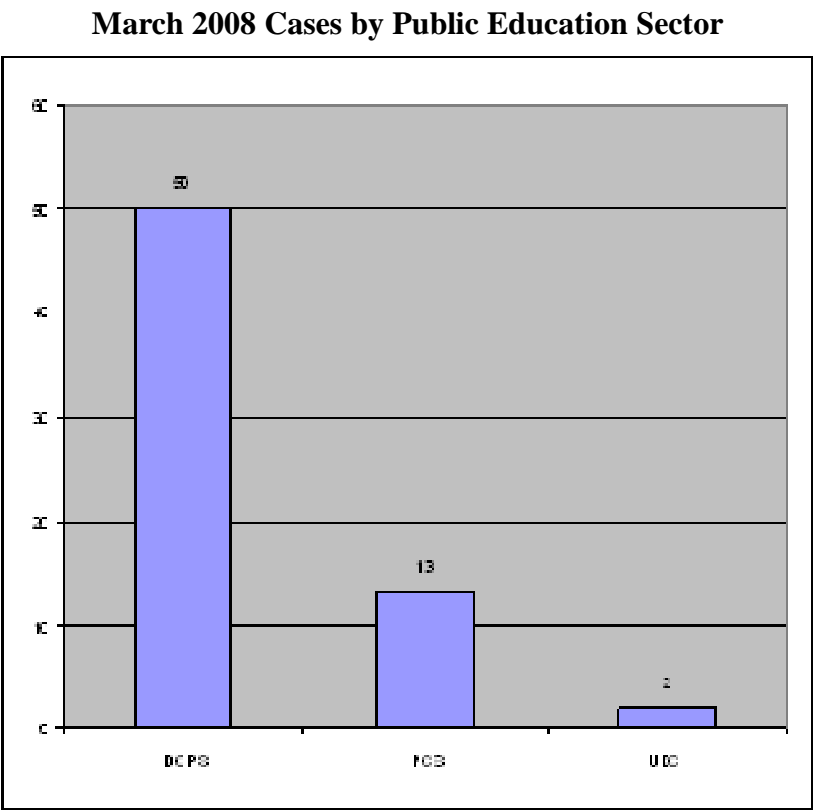


Figure 5 – Number of Individual Contacts by Education Sector

Figure 5 shows the total number of individual contacts broken down by education sector. As in prior months, a majority of individuals contacted the Ombudsman about DCPS. 77 percent of the people

contacted the office for help resolving problems with DCPS. Individual concerns about Public Charter Schools (PCS) comprised 20 percent of the March cases. UDC issues totaled 3 percent.

University of the District of Columbia Case Study

Students from one of the health education programs at the University of the District of Columbia expressed concern about several areas in their program. They expressed concern about the teaching staff and the quality of the instruction. They reported facilities issues, including inadequate laboratory equipment as well as leaky ceilings and poorly lighted classrooms. The students also reported concerns about the university's ability to provide necessary apprentice training opportunities with local health care providers in the District. When the University changed its online practice program for comprehensive exams, the change created new fees that the student financial aid office did not know about and would not provide aid to cover. Many of the student's concerns raised questions about the core effectiveness as well as the sustainability of this university health education program. The students said they tried to present their concerns through the grievance process defined by the university, but found that process ineffective. The Ombudsman facilitated a meeting with the students and university administrators to highlight these issues and discussed the need to develop a plan of action to correct agreed upon problems. The University agreed to:

- Evaluate existing apprenticeship programs and improve availability where necessary
- Improve communications about the grievance process
- Improve communication between the department and other areas of university about program changes that impact services to students
- Direct all student program fees to the specific department to improve program resources, including laboratories
- Improve student program evaluations to get more detailed information about the quality of the instructional programs and the instructors, including confidential exit interviews for seniors
- Assess and repair facilities problems

Conclusion

The Ombudsman continues to receive a majority of its cases from individuals with concerns about student-related issues. Additionally, a majority of those cases are about issues within DCPS schools. In March, the office saw an increase in the number of student safety-related issues, including bullying and student-on-student violence. Lack communication between home and school continues to be a relevant source of the problems that reach the Office of the Ombudsman. Ombudsman staff facilitates conversations between home and school that first seeks to reach agreement on the problem. Once the parties define the problem, then Ombudsman staff mediates fair resolution of the issue. Consistent staff contacts related to pay and benefits point to procedural issues in DCPS human resources operation. Efforts to correct human resource systems, as well as improve school climate and home/school communication, will be critical to the success of the overall reform.